

THE GULL



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON SOCIETY // VOL. 106 NO. 3 SUMMER 2022

DIGESTING THE PROBLEM OF PLASTIC

BY RYAN NAKANO

Plastic one-use bottles, hard plastic to-go food containers, plastic car parts, plastic snack wrappers, plastic bottle caps, plastic straws, plastic cigarette mouth pieces, plastic pens, plastic bags, hundreds of small pieces of Styrofoam, hundreds of very small micro pieces of hard plastic from manufactured items...In May, 170 pounds of waste was removed from Martin Luther King Jr. Shoreline in Oakland only to be replaced the following month.

For the past three years, GGAS volunteer Brett Johnson has been working to protect the shoreline by removing trash during monthly cleanups. “When I’m seeing all the Pepsi bottles, Starbucks and McDonalds plastic cups, I think about these companies and the companies that make all the plastic,” Johnson said. “Why aren’t they taxed?”

CONTINUED on page 3

Western Gull in North Richmond with plastic in its beak.
Alan Krakauer





Point Molate, photo by Jack Scheinman, and Ridgway's Rail, photo by Rick Lewis.

CARRYING OUT THE CALIFORNIA 30X30

BY GLENN PHILLIPS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Watching a Ridgway's Rail cross the mudflats at Martin Luther King Jr. Shoreline this spring (a life bird!), I was reminded of Golden Gate Audubon's role in preserving these precious remnants of salt marshes and mudflats that once lined the San Francisco Bay. Since 1938, Golden Gate Audubon has fought for the protection of San Leandro Bay, protesting illegal dumping, and successfully fighting for the restoration of 73 acres of marshland in San Leandro Bay.

Governor Gavin Newsom's California 30x30 campaign continues the legacy of preservation and restoration that has been a hallmark of Golden Gate Audubon's last

century. The campaign seeks to preserve and restore 30% of California's lands and coastal waters by 2030 to conserve biodiversity and prevent and mitigate climate change through nature-based solutions. Currently, 24% of the state is durably protected and managed in ways that protect ecosystems.

What is a nature-based solution? Simply put, it's what Golden Gate Audubon does best—protecting intact natural systems, improving degraded ones, and restoring natural systems where they have been destroyed. Today, Golden Gate Audubon is working to protect Point Molate, whose relatively undisturbed watershed nourishes critical eelgrass beds in the shallow bay

waters offshore. Golden Gate Audubon continues work nurturing natural habitats at MLK Jr. Shoreline, Heron's Head Park, and Crissy Field, where volunteers remove invasive species and plant appropriate native plants to enhance existing ecosystems. At Pier 94, working with the San Francisco Conservation Corps and dozens of volunteers, we are rebuilding saltmarsh and associated uplands where concrete piers once stood.

Maybe this effort is all for the birds, who surely benefit from improved habitat, but while we are at it, we are making the Bay Area better for plants, insects, fish, mammals and everything in between.

NEWS BRIEFS

Birdathon 2022 Conclusion

After an extremely successful Birdathon, our community helped us raise \$71,462, the most we have ever raised during our Birdathon fundraising season to date. We are so grateful to all of those who contributed. Special shoutout to Dan Harris for individually raising \$2,605.

In-Person Speaker Series

After two plus years of online speaker series webinars, Golden Gate Audubon is finally getting back to holding in-person talks starting August 18 at our Annual Memberships Meeting featuring Bob Lewis's talk on California Hummingbirds. Stay tuned for more in-person speaker events soon.

New Interim Deputy Director

Former Board Member Whitney Grover took on the new Interim Deputy Director staff position at Golden Gate Audubon at the end of May. Grover will work closely with the Executive Director to manage administrative functions and oversee programs in her new role.

PLASTIC from page 1

In November, California voters will again be given the opportunity to take a stand on single-use plastic.

The California Recycling and Plastic Pollution Reduction Act aims to reduce production of single-use plastic by 25% by 2030 and requires all single-use plastic packaging and foodware to be reusable, refillable, recyclable or compostable by the same time.

According to the legislation, “Nearly nine million tons of plastic enters the ocean each year globally...researchers have found deadly levels of plastic pollution in the guts of seabirds, sea turtles, and marine mammals.”

Professor Peter Hodum, at the University of Puget Sound studies the effects of marine plastic debris on birds. In 2016, he and his students observed the gastrointestinal tracts of dead Northern Fulmars and Sooty Shearwaters, two seabird species abundant in California during the late summer.

What they found was microplastic.

For Sooty Shearwaters, 64 percent were found with an average of 13.3 pieces of plastic in their stomachs. For Northern Fulmars, 128 of 143 were discovered with plastic pieces.

According to Hodum, ingestion of plastic can have multiple physiological impacts on birds, ranging from perforation to plastic



Dead baby Albatross with plastic in its stomach on the Midway Atoll.

Chris Jordan

Birds can wind up with plastics in their guts in two ways. One, they mistake it for food and ingest it directly. Or, they eat something that has plastic in it.

accumulation in the ventriculus (gizzard), causing the bird to feel full, disrupting its ability to maintain a healthy body condition. Persistent organic pollutants (POPs) from some plastics can also be absorbed into the bird's body.

In another study, *Plastics in the Pacific* (2020), researchers applied a risk assessment framework to measure the impact of ocean debris on 19 marine bird species in the California Current Large Marine ecosystem.

The study concluded that wide-ranging pelagic birds appear to be most at risk, noting their tendency to feed primarily on the surface, their relatively low fecundity, late age at maturity and unreliable means of offloading plastic.

How exactly is plastic making it into the stomach's of these birds?

The simple answer is, they're eating it.

“Birds can wind up with plastics in their guts in two ways. One, they mistake it for food and ingest it directly,” Hodum said. “Or, they eat something that has plastic in it.

The more complicated answer: unsustainable levels of production and consumption, according to one of the main proponents of the proposed legislation.

“What we thought was so convenient is actually the start of a very long problem that affects us at the end and the birds have been some of the first to show us,” Linda Escalante, the Southern California Legislative Director at National Resource Defense Council, said.

Escalante recalled how the photos of Laysan Albatrosses with plastic in their stomachs initially spurred her to action.

“These animals are so far away from us but their population is being devastated. On the human side of things, we consume a credit card of microplastics every week,” Escalante said. “We need to put this problem back to those who are largely responsible for it and who profit from its production. They are externalizing all the costs up and down our ecosystems.”

To learn more about the ballot initiative, you can read it in full here.



Trash found at MLK Jr. Shoreline during a cleanup day with Golden Gate Audubon.

Brett Johnson

MOTUS OPERANDI: THE ART OF TRACKING BIRD MIGRATION

BY MARGARET HETHERWICK

Move over, Sutro—there’s a new antenna in town.

The San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory will be hosting a MOTUS radio telemetry tower in their backyard park, Coyote Point Recreation Area, in Milpitas. The tower will assist with a global effort to track the flight behavior of birds across the Northern and Southern hemispheres.

“MOTUS is radio telemetry with a twist. The philosophy of MOTUS is to harness the collective power of individual projects into one massive coordinated effort,” said Amie MacDonald, Birds Canada British Columbia Motus Wildlife Tracking System Coordinator during an informational talk. “This can expand the scale and impact of everyone’s work, while maximizing scarce research funds.”

The system is shockingly simple and non-invasive. MOTUS scales up radio broadcast technology available since the 60’s to create a vast web of antennae across migration corridors, gathering tiny points of data into one giant data hub. With information from MOTUS, you can follow a warbler you met in the park all the way to its winter home in Panama.

In the past, tracking via telemetry has been cumbersome.

“Traditionally, when wildlife researchers used telemetry, the transmitters would



New MOTUS antenna at Coyote Point by Dan Wenny.

each operate at a different frequency so they could be individually identified,” said MacDonald. “The receiver would cycle through each of the frequencies, monitoring for each of them, and you would be able to know which bird was detected by the frequency that got a hit.”

Unlike previous telemetry efforts, every MOTUS device is on the exact same radio frequency, so there is no channel-flipping necessary. Instead, to distinguish data points, a bird is given a solar or battery-powered tracking device with its own signature

digital ID, like an IP address on a computer, which it wears like a backpack. This way, the MOTUS antenna can stay tuned to one frequency and scan for pings detected from nearby devices on birds. As the backpack device moves in and out of the detection area from a tower, it can tell scientists about how the bird traveled.

“The advantages are huge—the smallest available devices, other than bird bands, are radio transmitters. They have very high temporal precision, right down to the second. You don’t need to recapture the bird. It’s collaborative, and it’s automated. Receivers are continuously monitoring transmitters. It makes things easier,” said MacDonald.

So far, MOTUS data has been able to confirm logistics of shorebird migration that would have been incredibly difficult to find otherwise. In James Bay, Ontario, crews looked at the travel habits of six different shorebird species using MOTUS trackers, and found that shorebirds that had accrued more fat, stopped less—information that would have been nearly impossible to confirm without a detailed catalog of individual birds’ movements.

The best part, for MacDonald, is that MOTUS is available to anyone who wants to participate. “With the right tools and a little creativity, anyone can put up a MOTUS station,” she said.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Gum Tree Girls Fest

Join us in celebrating the women-led legacy that saved Glen Park and Glen Canyon Park by attending the Gum Tree Girls Fest on July 10 from 10:30am-3:30pm (Glen Canyon Park Recreation Area, SF). We’ll have a booth there, come through.

Annual Members Meeting

Interested in becoming more involved and informed as a Golden Gate Audubon member? Come meet with us at the David Brower Center in Berkeley for our Annual Members Meeting on August 18 from 6-8:30pm. We look forward to seeing and hearing from you soon.

Write for our Blog

All interested blog contributors are welcome to pitch their article idea(s) to our communications desk at rnakano@goldengateaudubon.org. We are especially interested in publishing blog posts from folks in underrepresented communities including; BIPOC, LGBTQIA+ individuals and people with disabilities.

Lands End in San Francisco, California. Photo by Sid Verma on Unsplash.

LANDS END: BIRDING HOTSPOT

BY DOMINIK MOSUR

LOCATION

**Lands End
Trail, Golden
Gate National
Recreation Area,
San Francisco**

*Multiple
access
points lead
to miles of
trails.*

Summertime can be slow for the city birder. Migration is largely over by the end of May and city parks and backyard green belts only harbor a few hardy local nesting species.

At this time of year, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area parcel at Lands End becomes especially relevant on early mornings when getting out of town isn't possible.

Multiple access points lead to miles of trails weaving through wonderful land birding habitat in San Francisco. Willow thickets on steep slopes hold some of the last breeding territories of Orange-crowned Warblers in the county. Hutton's Vireos, Swainson's Thrushes, Purple Finches and Wilson's Warblers summer here as well.

On days when prevailing onshore winds die back, the stands of trees along Lands End become vagrant traps where misdirected Eastern Kingbirds, Northern Parulas and Chestnut-sided Warblers show up like a midsummer Christmas gift to brighten a foggy morning. I've often thought of this place as the city's version of Outer Point Reyes.

Turning one's attention to the ocean, check out the observation deck above the Sutro Bath ruins. This point

overlooking Seal Rocks is a great perch from which to study the activity on the water. Thousands of Common Murres can be present on productive days, joined by other local breeders: Brandt's Cormorants, Pigeon Guillemots, Caspian Terns (which can be seen all day carrying food to their colonies inside the Bay) and post breeding visitors: Brown Pelicans, Heermann's Gulls, and by early July, Elegant Terns. Some years, thousands of Sooty Shearwaters will be present offshore for days and an occasional Brown Booby has shown up to join the feeding frenzies as well.

Walking the Lands End trail, make sure to stop at the "Historical Shipwrecks" sign overlooking Hermit Rock and scan it along with the nearby waters for a returning Parakeet Auklet.

Since 2017, a single individual of this species which breeds in Alaska has returned each summer to this point on the San Francisco coastline. As of late May 2022 it was back for its 6th summer. Nesting on Hermit Rock are Pigeon Guillemots and a pair of Black Oystercatchers. By mid-July migrating Wandering Tattlers will start appearing on the rocks as well. All remain vigilant for Peregrine Falcons which rule the coast again with three pairs nesting within a few minutes of here.

Have a favorite birding site you'd like to share? Contact rnakano@goldengateaudubon.org.



Bonnie Lewkowicz and Judith Smith birding. Photo courtesy of Bonnie Lewkowicz.

BIRDING WHILE DISABLED

BONNIE LEWKOWICZ AND JUDITH SMITH

ZOOM

Thursday, July 21
7 p.m. program

Bonnie Lewkowicz and Judith Smith will share their experiences as wheelchair-using birders and will be joined by Tiffany Taylor, a birder who is blind. Hear what they need from the birding community and birding locations to feel welcome and included.

Bonnie Lewkowicz has combined her love of the outdoors with her work educating about and advocating for greater access to outdoor recreation for people with disabilities. She is the author of an accessible trail guidebook and two trail websites.

Judith Smith is an environmentalist, avid hiker, birder and advocate for accessibility in the outdoors. Judith received her CA Naturalist Certification at Sonoma Ecology Center in 2021 and assists with a Birding for All program at Bay Area Outreach and Recreation Program.

Tiffany Taylor is a blind birder who loves hearing the songs of the birds she encounters on her travels around the country. She enjoys visual descriptions her partner gives her to learn about the birds in more detail.

Zoom links and passcodes for upcoming presentations are available on our Speaker Series website at goldengateaudubon.org/education/speaker-series.

CALIFORNIA HUMMINGBIRDS AND MORE

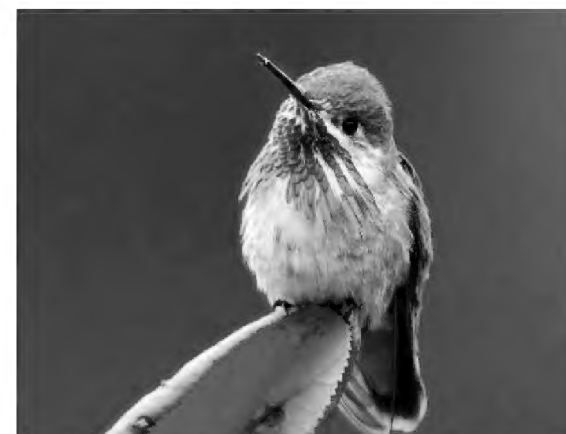
BOB LEWIS

HYBRID

Thursday, August 18
7:15 p.m. program
David Brower Center,
Golden Theater
or by Zoom

Although the focus of this talk is California hummingbirds, we'll also stop in Arizona and Central and South America as we discuss the origin and taxonomy of these flying jewels, their nesting and migration behaviors, and some of the features that make hummingbirds so unique.

Bob Lewis has hunted hummers with a camera since 2008, when he took a class in hummingbird photography from photographer Arthur Morris in Panama. Fascinated by these tiny creatures, he's photographed them throughout North, South and Central America.



Calliope Hummingbird.

Bob Lewis

BIRDS AND OHLONE'S PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

ZOOM

Thursday, September 22
7 p.m. program

GREGG CASTRO AND BEVERLY R. ORTIZ

Gregg Castro and Beverly R. Ortiz will share the significance of birds in the cultural, material, and spiritual lives of Ohlone's past, present, and future. They'll also describe how Ohlone land management practices increased the number and health of birds.

Gregg Castro (*t'rowt'raahl* Salinan/*rum sien* Ohlone) is a Board Member and past Chair of Salinan *T'rowt'raahl*, a Salinan advocacy group; a founder and Advisor for the California Indian Curriculum Coalition and Chair of the Native American Programs Committee for the Society for California Archaeology.

Beverly R. Ortiz, who holds a Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology from UC Berkeley, is an ethnographic consultant, long-time Columnist and Contributing Editor for *News from Native California*, and Co-Founder and Chair of the Native California Research Institute.



California Quail.

Rick Lewis

DONATIONS

Thank you for being part of our donor and member community.

We are deeply appreciative of every individual, business, and organization who supports Golden Gate Audubon. In this issue we recognize all of those who donated through our Annual Birdathon Fundraiser and all of our major donors from the past year.

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Golden Gate Audubon gratefully acknowledges the generous donors who contributed during our 2022 Birdathon fundraiser. We also appreciate all those who registered for trips and participated in our online auction.

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Golden Gate Audubon Society engages people to experience the wonder of birds and to translate that wonder into actions which protect native bird populations and their habitats.

ABOUT GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON SOCIETY

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1 The Problem of Plastic

California voters will take a stand on legislation addressing plastic pollution and its impact on birds, other wildlife and humans.

4 MOTUS Operandi

SF Bay Bird Observatory will host a new radio telemetry tower in Milpitas to help track the flight behavior of birds.

5 Lands End

The Golden Gate National Recreation Area parcel at Lands End makes for the perfect spot for birding during the summer.

BACKYARD BIRDER



Band-tailed Pigeon.

BAND-TAILED PIGEON

BY ERIC SCHROEDER

I was shocked last month when I looked up in my backyard in the Berkeley flats as three Band-tailed Pigeons (*Patagioenas fasciata*) flew overhead. These are big, chunky birds—purple-gray with a white band across the back of their neck and a distinctive orange bill with a black tip. Not a species I think of as a “backyard bird.” I remembered a conversation during my first Golden Gate Audubon field trip a decade ago in Tilden Park. As a couple of Bandies flew

overhead, one birder remarked that while he often saw them in the park, he never saw them downhill in the city. Another birder concurred. And in the decade since then, neither had I.

It turns out I shouldn’t have been surprised. The Band-tailed Pigeon is found from Alaska to Argentina and its range includes much of the western United States. Like its close relative the ubiquitous Rock Pigeon (*Columba livia*) which they resemble in size, appearance, and movement, they are generalists and are found across a wide swath of habitats. As *Birds of the World* notes, they are “able to nest and feed in towns and near farms as well as in distant forests.”

The closest relatives of the Band-tails were Passenger Pigeons, now extinct, of course. No one knows what the primary cause of their demise was, but hunting was responsible in part—an estimated ten million birds were slaughtered in just one incident. The Band-tail population is decreasing steadily, but hunting is only a sliver of the reason. (Yes, it’s legal to hunt them in California: One hunting magazine refers to them as “a wingshooter’s dream.”)

A larger threat may be habitat loss. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) suggests that management practices privileging conifers over hardwood and shrubs may be causing food shortages for the birds. And recently the CDFW, working with UC Davis researchers, identified a pathogen, *Trichomonas stableri*, responsible for large Band-tail die-offs. Jack Dumbacher at the California Academy of Sciences suggests that similar pathogens might have been partly responsible for the Passenger Pigeon’s demise. With the conservation tools now available to us, let’s hope we do better with the Band-tail so city sightings like mine become commonplace.